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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to describe the family patterns and attitudes toward dentistry of women dentists. The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire distributed to 226 women dentists selected from the 1979 membership list of the American Association of Women Dentists, with a return of 65 percent. Almost half of those surveyed had been out of dental school only 1-10 years, while approximately one-fifth had been out 30 or more years. Frequency and percentage tallies were compiled and chi-square correlations were used to compare subgroups of the sample. Analysis of the data showed that 86 percent of the women have been or are now married, while 14 percent never married. Of those who did marry, 45 percent married for the first time during the first 10 years after dental school graduation, while 49 percent married for the first time either before or during dental school. One in six has been divorced or separated. Approximately half of those who married have either one or two children, while 34 percent have no children. Sixty-nine percent of those who had children had their first child during the first 10 years after dental school graduation. Although dental school produced a strain on marriages, most marriages were happier after graduation. Conflicts between home and work were acknowledged by one-fifth of the women. Most of the women were involved in private, rather than group, practice of general dentistry. The study concluded that career satisfaction among the women dentists was very high. Approximately 90 percent of the respondents indicated they find dentistry financially rewarding; they enjoy the opportunity to be independent and to interact with their patients; and they do not find dentistry repetitious or boring. Three-fourths of the group would choose dentistry again and would encourage a daughter to do likewise. (KC)

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# FAMILY AND CAREER PATTERNS OF WOMEN DENTISTS

In 1866 Lucy B. Hobbs graduated from a United States dental college and became the first woman in the world to graduate from dental college (Rezai, 1977). Despite the fact that a United States school graduated the first woman dentist, dentistry in this country has traditionally been a very male-dominated profession. In 1970 only 3 percent of practicing dentists were women (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976). It has only been in the last six years that the percentage of women graduating from dental schools in this country has shown any significant increase.

Prior to the mid-1960s women dentists had received very little attention in the professional literature. During the last ten years a few studies have been published dealing primarily with career choice, personality characteristics, attitudes of male colleagues, the dental school experience and professional activities (Austin and Tenzer, Coombs, Gershen and McCreary, Jones and Shapiro, Levine, Linn, Rosenberg and Thompson, Scholle, Solomon and Pait, Tillman, Todd and Schott). Very little is known about the family patterns and career satisfaction of female dentists. It was the purpose of this study to describe the family patterns and attitudes toward dentistry of women dentists.

## Methodology

The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire distributed to 226 women dentists selected from the 1979 membership list of the American Association of Women Dentists. The sample included one-half of the regular members. Sixty-five percent (147) of the questionnaires were returned in usable condition.

Almost half (46 percent) of those surveyed had been out of dental school only one to ten years, while approximately one fifth (18 percent) had been out thirty or more years.

The average age at dental school graduation was twenty-six years, with a range of from twenty-one to thirty-eight years. The younger ages were more common in the group practicing thirty or more years. Educational requirements were shorter at that time, as a college degree was generally not required for dental school admission.

Frequency and percentage tallies were compiled and chi-square correlations were used to compare sub-groups of the sample.

## Results

### Family Patterns

#### Marital Status

Two-thirds (68 percent) of the women surveyed are now married. Another 17 percent have been married at some time, and 14 percent have never been married. A more detailed description is presented in table 1. A chi-square analysis comparing marital

Table 1

PRESENT MARITAL STATUS*

| Marital Status | Number | % of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Never Married | 21 | 14.3 |
| Married | 90 | 61.2 |
| Separated | 3 | 2.0 |
| Divorced | 12 | 8.2 |
| Widowed | 10 | 6.8 |
| Remarried--Divorcee | 7 | 4.8 |
| Remarried--Widow | 3 | 2.0 |
| No Response | 1 | .7 |

* N = 147

status of graduates of the 70s, 60s, 50s, and earlier showed a significant difference. A number of trends were observed. The graduates from the 50s, 60s, and 70s showed (1) slightly more than expected in the now married category and (2) fewer than expected in the previously married category. The group that graduated before 1950 showed (1) fewer than expected in the now married category, (2) more in the previously married category, and (3) slightly more in the never married category.

The greatest number (45 percent) of those who did marry, did so for the first time during the first ten years following dental school graduation (table 2). However, one-fourth married before dental school, and one-fourth during dental school. The chi-square analysis on this question showed a significant difference with a probability level of .05. The following trends

were observed: (1) The group that graduated during the 1970s showed a trend toward earlier marriages (i.e., before or during dental school). (2) The group that graduated before 1950 showed a trend to marry after graduation. One explanation for these trends may be the age difference at time of graduation. The graduates from the 70s are generally older because more years of preprofessional training were required.

Table 2

TIME OF FIRST MARRIAGE

| Time Period | Number | % of Married* |
|---|---|---|
| Before Dental School | 32 | 25.4 |
| During Dental School | 30 | 23.8 |
| First Ten Years After | 57 | 45.2 |
| More than Ten Years After | 5 | 4.0 |

* N = 126

Children

Approximately half (52 percent) of those who have been married had either one or two children. Thirty percent had two children, 22 percent had only one child, and 34 percent had no children. This high percentage without children may be related to the young ages of the sample. Table 3 summarizes the data regarding children.

The majority (69 percent) of those who had children, indicated their first child was born during the first ten years after dental school graduation. Not all waited this long, though,

Table 3

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

| Children | Number | % of Married* |
|---|---|---|
| One | 27 | 21.4 |
| Two | 38 | 30.2 |
| Three | 8 | 6.4 |
| Four | 7 | 5.6 |
| More than Four | 3 | 2.4 |
| None | 43 | 34.1 |

* N = 126

because one-fourth had their first child before or during dental school (see Table 4). A comparison of graduates from different decades showed a significant difference at the .02 level. Several trends were observed. The 1970s graduates showed trends toward (1) having no children, and (2) having children before dental school. The graduates from the 1950s and 60s tended to have more children than recent graduates.

Table 4

BIRTH OF FIRST CHILD

| Time Period | Number | % of Mothers* |
|---|---|---|
| Before Dental School | 11 | 13.6 |
| During Dental School | 10 | 12.3 |
| First Ten Years After | 56 | 69.1 |
| More Than Ten Years After | 4 | 4.8 |

* N = 81

Marital Happiness

Several trends emerged from analysis of the self-ratings of marital happiness: (!) Not many of the women rated their marriage in the unhappy/very unhappy categories during any time periods. (2) Dental school seemed to be a somewhat strenuous time for a marriage. This time period had the lowest number in the very happy category. (3) The longer the women had been out of dental school, the happier their marriages seemed to be. (4) Many women were admitting at all the time periods, that marriage is not a state of unmitigated bliss--there are unhappy as well as happy times. Graph I summarizes these ratings.

## Career Patterns

Attitudes Towards Career

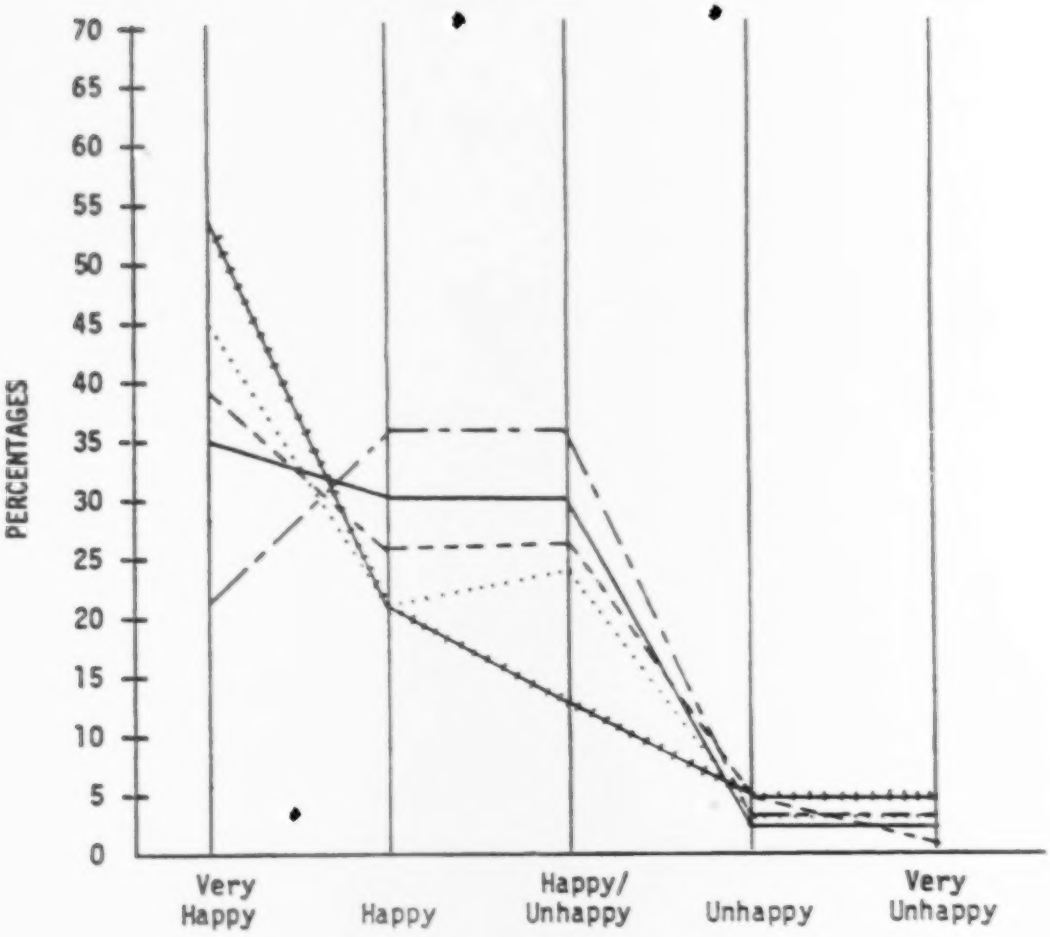
Table 5 gives a summary of the responses to the section dealing with specific attitudes and aspects of dentistry as a career. In responding to these twelve statements about the practice of dentistry, the participants were asked to select strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

In response to the statement that there are many opportunities for community service in dentistry, 70 per cent either strongly agree or agreed, while one-fourth of the women had apparently found few opportunities for community service because they disagreed with the statement.

When responding to the statement that they have experienced few conflicts between work and home/family responsibilities, approximately three-fourths strongly agreed or agreed, and

GRAPH 1

SELF-RATING OF MARITAL HAPPINESS




——— Before dental school (N=40)

— - — During dental school (N=64)

– – – – First ten years after dental school (N=114)

..... 11 - 25 years after dental school (N=54)

+++++++ More than 25 years after dental school (N=22)

Table 5

ATTITUDES TOWARD DENTISTRY*

| Statement | % Strongly Agree | % Agree | % Disagree | % Strongly Disagree | % No Answer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I have found many opportunities for community service in dentistry. | 22.45 | 47.62 | 20.41 | 3.40 | 6.12 |
| I have had relatively few conflicts between work responsibilities and home/family responsibilities. | 27.21 | 48.98 | 12.93 | 7.48 | 3.40 |
| I have found the practice of dentistry to be repetitious and boring. | 2.04 | 3.40 | 37.41 | 53.74 | 3.40 |
| I have found most male colleagues willing to accept and respect me professionally. | 27.89 | 54.42 | 10.20 | 3.40 | 4.08 |
| I have found dentistry to be financially rewarding. | 26.53 | 61.90 | 7.48 | 1.36 | 2.72 |
| If I were living my life over again, I would choose dentistry as a career. | 41.50 | 41.50 | 9.52 | 2.72 | 4.76 |
| In my practice I have been able to develop rapport with my patients and have found them willing to confide in me about personal matters. | 40.82 | 49.66 | 4.76 | 0.00 | 4.76 |
| Although many people are afraid of going to see a dentist, I have been able to ignore or overcome this attitude and it has not affected the way I feel about myself or my practice. | 42.18 | 44.90 | 5.44 | 3.40 | 4.08 |
| I have experienced a great deal of tension in connection with my dental practice. | 8.84 | 28.57 | 41.50 | 17.69 | 3.40 |
| If I had a daughter I would encourage her to choose dentistry as a career. | 25.85 | 49.66 | 16.33 | 2.04 | 6.12 |
| I have enjoyed the one-to-one relationship with my patients. | 55.78 | 39.46 | .68 | 1.36 | 2.72 |
| I have enjoyed dentistry because it has given me the opportunity to be independent. | 53.06 | 38.10 | 2.72 | 0.00 | 6.12 |

* N = 147

one-fifth disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although 20 percent seemed to have conflicts, it seems that the majority of these women are able to handle successfully the role expectations of work and home.

The statement to the effect that they had found dentistry to be repetitious and boring brought forth a fairly strong response. Ninety-one percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, negating a common criticism leveled at dentistry as a career.

The majority (82 percent) of the women strongly agreed or disagreed with the statement that they have found more male colleagues willing to accept and respect them professionally. However 13 percent seemed to have had some problems in this area.

Eighty-eight percent of the women agreed that they have found dentistry to be financially rewarding. Approximately 10 percent disagreed with the statement.

As for being satisfied or happy with their career, a little over four-fifths of the women agreed or strongly agreed that if they were choosing again they would choose dentistry. Twelve percent, however, did not appear so happy with their choice.

The statement to the effect that they have been able to develop rapport with their patients and have found the patients willing to confide in them about personal matters brought out a very positive response. Over 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while only 5 percent disagreed and no one strongly disagreed. The response is contrary to stereotypes of

dental practice and may suggest an emphasis on the personal relationships involved in dental practice.

The replies to the statement about many individuals being afraid of going to see a dentist indicated that most women dentists have been able to ignore or overcome this attitude and it does not appear to affect the way they feel about themselves or their practice.

There does seem to be some tension in connection with the actual dental practice. Approximately two-fifths of the women responded with a strongly agree or agree to the statement that they have experienced a great deal of tension in connection with their practice. Not all feel a great amount of tension, though, as is shown by the 59 percent who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Many of the women (75 percent) liked their career enough to say they would encourage their daughter to choose dentistry as a profession. It is interesting to note that 18 percent did not feel this way.

The strongest response in this section was given to the statement saying they have enjoyed the one-to-one relationship with their patients. Ninety-five percent responded with a strongly agree/agree, while only 2 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This correlates well with the response to the statement about patient rapport. This appears to be the area of greatest satisfaction for women dentists.

The second strongest response was to the statement dealing with independence. The majority (91 percent) strongly agreed or agreed that they enjoy dentistry because it gives them the opportunity to be independent. Three percent disagreed and no one strongly disagreed. This response seems to agree with previous studies suggesting desire for independence as a motivation for choice of dentistry as a career (Coombs, 1975; Linn, 1972).

A chi-square analysis was done to compare the answers given to the above questions by how long the respondents had been out of dental school and also by their marital status. No significant difference was found in the attitudes of the women. It did not matter if they had been out less than ten years or more than thirty years; or whether they were single, previously married, or married.

Career Trends

When the data on career trends were analyzed the results showed that during the first five years after dental school graduation the highest number of women were working at the private practice of general dentistry for twenty or more hours/week. The next most common job was teaching, with 26 percent participating less than twenty hours/week and 10 percent twenty or more hours/week. Twenty-two percent of the women worked at charity dentistry for less than twenty hours/week. The next most common involvement was the private practice of specialty dentistry. The fifth occupational involvement was residency training. It appears that for the young woman dentist the practice of dentistry is

mostly a solo affair. Not many become involved in a group practice, work for public health or industry, or get very involved in research. Another point of interest is that very few of the women were involved with only one job. They tended to participate in a variety of activities such as teaching and charity work. Very few go immediately into specialty training (table 6).

Table 6

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES DURING FIRST FIVE YEARS FOLLOWING GRADUATION

| Activity | Less Than 20 Hrs/Wk | More Than 20 Hrs/Wk |
|---|---|---|
| Private General Practice | 17.7% | 44.2% |
| Teaching | 26.5 | 10.2 |
| Charity Dentistry | 21.8 | 0.0 |
| Private Specialty Practice | 6.1 | 12.9 |
| Residency Training | 2.7 | 12.9 |

## Summary and Conclusions

### Family Patterns

Eighty-six percent of the women have been or are now married, while 14 percent never married. Of those that did marry, 45 percent married for the first time during the first ten years after dental school graduation, while 40 percent married for the first time either before or during dental school. One in six have been divorced or separated. Approximately half of those who married have either one or two children. Thirty-four percent have no children. Sixty-nine percent of those who had children had

their first child during the first ten years after dental school graduation.

The self-ratings on marital happiness during specified time periods showed a number of trends: (1) not too many rated their marriage in the unhappy/very unhappy categories during any time period; (2) dental school seemed to be a somewhat strenuous time for the marriage relationship; (3) the longer the women had been out of dental school the happier their marriages seemed to be; and (4) a good number of women were admitting, during all time periods, that marriage is not a state of unmitigated bliss--there are happy and unhappy times. Conflicts between home and work responsibilities were acknowledged by one-fifth of the women.

## Career Patterns

Most of the women were involved in private, rather than group, practice of general dentistry. The next most common activities, in terms of time involvement during the first five years after graduation, included teaching, charity dentistry, private specialty practice, and residency training. Most of the women did not limit themselves to just one aspect of the profession, but tended to participate in a variety of activities during the same time period.

Career satisfaction was very high. Approximately ninety percent of the respondents indicated they find dentistry financially rewarding and they enjoy the opportunity to be independent. They do not find dentistry repetitious and boring, and they have been able to overcome or ignore the attitude that

most people have of being afraid to go see a dentist. This has not affected the way they feel about themselves or their practice. The one-to-one relationships with their patients are the most satisfying aspect of their career, especially when they are able to help patients with personal matters in addition to dental care.

Over one-third of the women indicated they experienced a fair amount of tension in connection with their practice. Some also indicated a lack of respect from their male colleagues was a problem. However, four-fifths of the group stated they would choose dentistry again and would encourage a daughter to do likewise. Neither length of time since graduation nor marital status made any difference in attitudes toward dentistry.

## Conclusions

1. Dentistry seems to wear well, as shown by the positive attitudes of both older and younger dentists.
2. The greatest source of satisfaction for many women dentists is the personal one-to-one relationship with their patients.
3. Independence is a major positive factor with women dentists.
4. There is stress on the student marriage, but it recovers later on.
5. Small families seem to be compatible with professional involvement.
6. There are no extreme amounts of tension involved with the practice of dentistry, although there are some.
7. There are no extreme conflicts between work and home responsibilities, although some do exist.

It seems safe to conclude by saying that the women participating in this study were happy with their career choice, even after many years, and seemed to have generally happy marriages. It appears that dentistry might be a positive choice for a young woman considering a professional career in the healing arts.

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